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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the development of higher education in Cuba and its current status. Current educational development in Cuba is the result of more than four decades of sustained social and political endeavor. Three main features of this development have been identified. The first is the absolute commitment of the state to the educational project. The second is the active participation and decisive involvement of the population in the educational actions that were made in this period, and the third is the capacity for change of the national system of education to provide the best responses to the socioeconomic needs and demands of society. Cuban education is quite different from the rest of Latin American and Caribbean systems, both in the high enrollment at elementary and secondary levels and the high quality of primary and secondary education. Higher education in Cuba is moving from a concept of the university towards the community to one of the university in the community. Higher education is not the solution to all social problems, but it can be a vital part of building a society of greater social equity and justice. (SLD)

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Higher Education in Cuba in the 2000s. Past and Future

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HIGHER EDUCATION IN CUBA IN THE 2000s. PAST AND FUTURE

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Current educational development in Cuba is the result of more than four decades of sustained social and political endeavor. Characterizing such process is not an easy task. Three main features can be pointed out: **1) the absolute commitment of the State with the educational project; 2) the active participation and decisive involvement of the population in the educational actions that were made in this period, and 3) the capacity of change of the national system of education to give the best answers to the socioeconomic needs and demands, although the dynamics of changes has shown different degrees along the period.**

In view of real societal demands, democratization of education, with the largest social equity, cannot be limited to access. It should also guarantee that students do not become dropouts, that they complete their studies, and upon graduation, find a job. Therefore, democratization has not only required the expansion of education, but also other social measures as well.

In the last four decades, three educational moments have been transcendental. First of all, the 1961 National Literacy Campaign, which eradicated illiteracy as a social phenomenon in our country, and the 1962 University Reform, which established, among other principles, the unbreakable link between university and society. A second moment can be traced back to the 70s, with a mass scale intermediate education and the restructuring of higher education and the expansion of its network of institutions. The third moment is currently taking place with transformations carried out to enhance culture to the entire population[1].

Achievements in higher education cannot be analyzed without taking into consideration educational backgrounds. In the Cuban case, the characteristics of the educational system are quite different from the rest of the Latin American and Caribbean region. For example, gross enrolment rates nationwide, in age group 6-14 years old was 98,2% in 1999, and 99.5% for 6-11 years old group[1].

Furthermore, it is important to point out that the quality achieved in primary and secondary education is high. Since quality is not the same in all schools throughout the nation, special attention is being paid to reduce such gap. An example that endorses the positive results attained is the study of quality, carried out by the Latin American Laboratory of Evaluation of

[1] For more information : Gómez G. Luis, "El desarrollo de la Educación en Cuba", Pedagogía2003, La Habana, febrero, p. 8-9.

Quality, with a comparative analysis of results in thirteen countries[2] of the region with third and fourth graders in Math and Spanish Language Arts. The results obtained by Cuba surpassed the rest of the countries. The report stated " *What does the study reveal? The first finding is that results evidenced differences between the countries, both in terms of performance as well as in the distribution of achievements rates. Cuba stands out significantly among the countries of the region*".

At the present time, a group of programs have been set up to achieve an increasingly learned population and to continue enhancing the quality of education with more social equity. Among these programs: the distribution of TV and video sets in schools; the creation of an educational channel; the electrification with solar panels of the schools located in the most distant areas; the training of a larger number of teachers and professors so that group size in primary level does not exceed 20 students, and 15 students in secondary level; the production of audiovisual programs for all schools and the implementation of professional development of teachers; the inclusion of computing lessons in primary education; an ambitious publishing program; the improvement of curriculum design and of the teaching-learning process.

The social and economic reality in the beginnings of the 21st century is extremely complex. Suffice is to say that there are 800 million illiterates around the world. In Cuba a central objective for the whole National System of Education is the formation of ethical values in keeping with the development pattern of the nation. Our efforts are aimed at the molding of committed citizens, with an active participation in the sustainable human development, with high personal expectations, but also with societal commitments in which the vocation for peace, solidarity, respect of differences and responsibility prevails.

Some of the difficulties faced in Latin America are also common to the institutions of higher education in Cuba. The most significant common difficulty is the limitation of financial resources. It should be noted, however, that in the Cuban case, the government has always considered education as a state responsibility, and has made extraordinary efforts to maintain all educational services, even during the economic constraints of the country since the beginning of the 90's.

As a result of the economic measures taken, an inflection point took place in 1994, counteracting the descent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[3], which fell in 34,8 %, between 1990-1993. A sustained trend of the economic growth is reflected in the current budget for higher education in relation to the GDP, an increases from 1,45% to 2,25% between the years 1996 and 2001. Furthermore, these percent goes from 10% to 13,9% in the whole sector of education[4].

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[2] Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Honduras, México, Paraguay, Peru, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela.

[3] WEB Page Cuban Goberment < www.cubgob.cu > mayo 3/2002.

[4] For more information: CEPES/UH "Informe la Educación Superior en Cuba en la Década del 90", Editorial Felix Varela, La Habana 2002, p. 65-74.

Another element that illustrates the high priority given to education in state policies is the salary increase for all the professors and teachers, promulgated in 2001.

In the coming future and even when the country is still in the process of recovery of its economy, there are elements that allow us to foresee increases in the public funding which, supplemented with the strategic cooperation of the sectors of production and the services, the increase of the efficiency in the use of available resources and the alternative funding raised by institutions of higher learning, will provide higher education with a larger material and financial support.

The process of development of higher education, structured as a subsystem of the national system of education (SNE), went from 20 000 students (level 5-A[iii]) in 1960 to 310 000 in the academic year 1987-1988. Preliminary estimates of the enrolment in the 2002-2003 academic year show a total of 211 000, with an evident recovery of the reductions suffered in the 90s. In the past decade the fundamental objective was to maintain the levels of quality so far attained. Undoubtedly, at present the main objective of the "universalization of the university" will have an effect on the trend of expanding educational services, both in undergraduate and graduate levels.

The participation of women in higher education is in line with their greater involvement in the social life. In the academic year 2001-2002, they constituted 64.7% of the total of enrolment, although in the branches of the technical sciences they only reach 28%[iv].

The subsystem of higher education in the academic year 2001-2002 had a network of 63 public institutions, in which 81 undergraduate programs are offered[5].

Universities have an extremely important and active participation in the different projects and social actions in the country. Postgraduate studies have increasingly broadened their services and are undergoing permanent improvement so as to better meet the societal needs of enterprises and the individual needs of professionals.

In connection with the scientific work that is developed by professors and students, it is important to point out the high impact of their results. Among other indicators, it can be pointed out that in the annual awards granted by the Academy of Sciences of Cuba in recognition to relevant research, researchers from institutions of higher education generally receive half of the awards.

Among the mid- term trends of Cuban higher education are the following[6]:

[5] For more information: CEPES/UH ob. cit. p. 11-35.
[6] For more information: CEPES/UH ob. cit. p. 127-131.

- To continue improving undergraduate education, searching a bigger integration with a humanistic approach.

- To maintain the broad profile in undergraduate programs and to supplement these courses with on-the-job training and postgraduate studies

- To guarantee that the levels of quality attained continue to increase. A key tool in the management of quality of the different processes carried out by the institutions of higher education (IES) is the expansion and improvement of the evaluation and accreditation processes.

- To consolidate the integration between teaching, research and production, as basic principle of the formation model.

- In the training of teachers the link with the social practice will continue as an essential component of such training, taking advantage of the experience and the current projects of improvement of the primary and secondary education.

- To enhance the link with the social practice. To identify new strategic alliances with the state bodies and enterprises to promote and encourage development.

- To continue the preparation and training programs for executives in the sphere of public administration and of other social institutions, in keeping with their training needs.

- In postgraduate education, the efforts will concentrate mainly on the expansion of the services and the increase of quality. The Accreditation Programs System will play a significant role in assessing quality increase.

- To increase the number of distance learning programs, using the new information and communication technologies.

- Research conducted at institutions of higher education should continue advancing with concrete results and the transfer of knowledge of high impact and national recognition. International impact and recognition is also aimed at.

- The strategy of enhancement of "human capital" of institutions of higher education will necessarily be geared by the implementation of new actions in the professional development of the faculty and of all university workers. Moreover, the strategy includes measures to foster motivation and a sense of belonging. A system of rewards and incentives is also included. Within the professional development of the faculty, programs leading to a Ph.D. degree are of utmost importance.

- The improvement of university management and the programs for training the executives and administrators in universities will also occupy leading places.

- One important support to implement our strategic planning is the development and increasing use of communication and information technologies in all university processes, including greater access and expansion to intranets and the Internet.

- Enlargement of international collaboration. To continue the training of professionals from Third World countries, particularly at the Latin American School of Medicine and the International School of Physical Culture and Sports. In the last 40 years, Cuban institutions of higher learning have graduated in a wide spectrum of undergraduate programs more than 17 000 foreign students, mainly coming from Latin America and Africa.

- The strengthening of the national network of institutions of higher learning will ensure higher levels of quality, both in individual institutions as well as in the network as a whole, as a result of more effective collaborative and solidarity cooperation reached between institutions.

As it has already been mentioned, the efforts in the educational sphere are guided to promote, as advocated by UNESCO, **life-long education for all.**

One might ask whether taking into consideration the Cuban reality this is possible to obtain with traditional methods. In the academic year 1987-1988 we reached the largest undergraduate enrolment; our gross rate of enrolment was then of 25.1 In the present academic year 2002-2003 new forms are being experienced to cope with the objective of "*universalizing the university*". Not only the old concept of the **ivory tower** has been left behind. We are also moving on from the concept of the **university towards the community** to a new stage. **the university in the community.**

These objectives have brought about the creation of Municipal[7] University Branches (MUB), with a small professional staff from the parent university. The faculty is made up mainly of local professionals who have shown their interest in becoming university professors. They have undergone a rigorous process of selection and have received pedagogical training. In this initial stage MUBs offer studies in several undergraduate programs, in the form of assisted distance learning courses. Tutors and mentors have been appointed to support and assist students. It is expected that graduates from MUBs show an equivalent level of performance of those graduated from full-time courses.

[7] The municipality is the base of the political administrative division of the country.

Our biggest challenge in the coming years is definitely to work towards the successful implementation of this new experience, which could even revolutionize the entire subsystem. At present, some structural transformations at parent universities are taking place in order to increase their capacity to deal with and direct all the work of this new experience. Moreover, universities have to learn to work under terms of uncertainty in the planning of their fundamental processes, to make efficient use of team work, both within the academic community and with the social actors in the local communities, and to be more creative and to produce more initiatives so as to show more readiness and adaptation to changes. Although these requirements are fairly new to educational institutions, they are not new in other sectors of society, such as the productive sector.

As part of the necessities of the Cuban higher education, the Center of Studies for the Improvement of Higher Education (CEPES) was founded twenty years ago at the University of Havana. The staff is made up of a small number of highly qualified experts who conduct research and graduate courses to contribute to the development of the scientific foundations and ideas concerning higher education. The mission of CEPES is the generation, assimilation, adaptation, diffusion, transfer and use of the state of arts of scientific and technological knowledge, particularly in Cuba and in Latin America and the Caribbean. It has close collaborative links and projects with many national and foreign institutions. This institution has shown the importance of supporting decision-making in higher education with scientific results. In the past decade, other groups of studies with similar missions have been created in other universities throughout the country.

Summarizing, the decisive factor to foster and facilitate the purposes of reaching high levels of relevance is definitely the community of women and men working in universities, whose zeal and commitment are fundamental for success.

The role played by students is equally important. A greater strengthening in the necessary alliance within the university community is attained when students actively participate in university life and become more reflexive and responsible in university decision-making.

It is our duty as the academic community to promote the continuing necessary changes in the university, in keeping with the needs of the times to come. It should be noted, however, **that education, and higher education as part of it, does not provide the solution to all problems. Education is a necessary but not sufficient condition for social development**. Nonetheless universities can definitely contribute to the building of a society showing greater social equity and justice. Education can be instrumental in implementing the necessary changes to improve the existent reality. In addition, higher education is responsible for the training of professionals and of the future committed leaders in society.

Universities will continue functioning as the ideal place for debate, for critical thinking and reflection that favor the appropriate analyses of society and

social life. Furthermore, universities have to continue working to ensure the necessary support to secondary and primary education, and to increase the number of actions to take the utmost advantage of the opportunity that the knowledge offers.

A feeling of responsibility and of dissatisfaction should mobilize students, professors, workers and university administrators, who should act in a cohesive way to contribute to achieving a better society and a better world. Among the proposals to be taken into account for these purposes is that of the General Secretary of the United Nations, who at Summit of the Millennium (2000), called for the sharing of the following values: *freedom, equity, solidarity, tolerance, non-violence, respect for nature, and shared responsibility*[v].

Cuba is willing to share its experience and to learn from others. The challenge is clearly defined The answer awaits for the Latin American and Caribbean university community to join efforts and political will, minds and souls to reach those high expectations. You can count with us.

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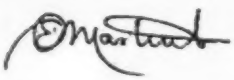
Signature: 

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